

# The Unknowable God

by Joseph Parker

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*Joseph Parker explores the concept of God as both unknowable and yet intimately knowable through love and experience, emphasizing the limitations of human language and understanding.*

**Scripture:** Exodus 33:20, Matthew 6:9, John 1:18, Romans 1:28

**Topics:** "Divine Mystery", "Gods Nature"

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## Description

Joseph Parker preaches about the mystery of God being both unknown and unknowable, emphasizing that the limitations of human understanding cannot fully grasp the essence of God. He challenges the notion of trying to confine God within human logic or theological propositions, highlighting the beauty of God's mystery and the hope found in seeking Him despite His incomprehensibility. Parker encourages a shift in perspective from viewing God as merely Unknowable to embracing Him as Superknowable, Supervisible, and Supercomprehensible, allowing for a deeper and more luminous understanding of the divine.

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## Transcript

GOD IS THE unknown and the unknowable. Yet He is also the one Reality and the one Energy of the universe. What it is possible to know, it must be possible to explain-to put into words, which, being all set together, sum themselves into the exact measure of the thing that is known.

What can be known may, of course, be contained by the faculty that knows it. The vessel is of necessity larger than its contents. If, then, any faculty of mine knows God, that faculty contains God, and is in that sense larger than God, which is impossible and absurd.

Whatever I can know is, by the very fact that I can know it, less than I am. It may be bigger as to mere size in length and breadth, such as a huge disc that glares with light or a globe flying fast. Yet its speed can be set down in so many ciphers or lines of ciphers on a child's slate, so clearly that we can say: It is so much an hour the great wings fly, and not one mile more.

What is that but mere bigness, an appeal to our easily excited wonder, a size that shakes our pride and bids us mind our ways, or a weight that may fall upon us from the sky? It is nothing, nothing but an ascertainable quantity and intensity of fire-a wide and high stair leading to nothing!

Tiring of the Known

Unknown-Unknowable. Thanks. I am tired of the Known and the Knowable, tired of saying this star is fifty millions of miles in circumference, that star is ninety millions of miles farther off than the moon, and yonder planet is five million times larger than the earth. It is mere gossip in polysyllables, getting importance by hugeness, something that would never be named in inches and that owes its fame to the word millions.

It is in this manner that men want to make a mouthful of God! A great mouthful, no doubt, say even to the extent of super-millions squared and cubed into a whole slateful of ciphers, but pronounceable in words! Failing this, they suppose they have destroyed Him by saying He is Unknowable and Unknown.

It makes me glad to think He is! That any One or any Thing should be unknowable and should yet invite and stimulate inquiry is educationally most hopeful. O soul of mine, there are grand times in store for thee!

I cannot rattle my staff against the world's boundary wall and say, "The End!" Poor staff! It thrusts itself into a cloud; it goes over the edge; it is nearly pulled out of my hand by gravitation that pulls even the earth itself and keeps it from reeling and falling.

Yes, prying staff. You can touch nothing but a most ghostly emptiness. Soul of man, if you would truly see - see the Boundless, see the Possible, see God-go into the dark when and where the darkness is thickest. That is the mighty and solemn sanctuary of vision.

The light is vulgar in some uses. It shows the mean and vexing detail of space and life with too gross a palpableness, and it frets the sensitiveness of the eyes. I must find the healing darkness that has never been measured off into millions and paraded as a nameable quantity of surprise and mystery.

Deus absconditus. God hides Himself, most often in the light; He touches the soul in the gloom and vastness of night, and the soul, being true in its intent and wish, answers the touch without a shudder or a blush. It is even so that God comes to me.

God does not come through man's high argument, a flash of human wit, a sudden and audacious answer to an infinite enigma, or a toilsome reply to some high mental challenge. His path is through the pathless darkness-without a footprint to show where he stepped; through the forest of the night he comes, and when he comes the brightness is all within!

My God-unknown and unknowable--cannot be chained as a Prisoner of logic or delivered into the custody of a theological proposition or figured into literal art. Shame be the portion of those who have given Him a setting within the points of the compass, who have robed Him in cloth of their own weaving, and surnamed Him at the bidding of their cold and narrow fancy!

For myself, I know that I cannot know Him; that I have a joy wider than knowledge, a conception that domes itself above my best thinking, as the sky domes itself in infinite pomp and luster above the earth whose beauty it creates.

God? God! God! Best defined when undefined; a Fire that may not be touched; a Life too great for shape of image; a Love for which there is no equal name. Who is He? God. What is He? God. Of whom begotten? God. He is at once the question and the answer, the self-balance, the All.

Defining God

We have tried to build our way up to Him by using many words with some cunning and skill. We have thought to tempt Him into our cognition by the free use of flattering adjectives. Surely, we said, He will pour his heart's wine into the golden goblets we hold out to catch the sacred stream.

We have called Him Creator, Sovereign, Father; then Infinite Creator, Eternal Sovereign, Gracious Father, as if we could build up our word-bricks to heaven and surprise the Unknown and the Unknowable in His solitude, and look upon Him face to face. We have come near to blasphemy herein.

What wonder had we been thrust through with a dart! We have thought our yesterday roomy enough to hold God's Eternity and have offered Him with every show of abounding sufficiency the hospitality of our everchanging words as a medium of revelation.

Our words! Words that come and go like unstable fashions. Words that die of very age; words that cannot be accepted unanimously in all their suggestions and relations even by two men. Into these words we have invited God, and because He cannot come into them but as a devouring fire, we have stood back in offense and unbelief.

God! God! God! Ever hidden, ever present, ever distant, ever near; a Ghost, a Breath, making the knees knock in terror, ripping open a grave at the very feet of our pleasure; a mocking laugh at the feast, filling all space like the light, yet leaving room for all His creatures; a Terror, a Hope-Undefinable, Unknowable, Irresistible, Immeasurable. God is a Spirit!

Undefinable, Unknown, Unknowable, Invisible, Incomprehensible. These are grim negatives, emptinesses that deceive us by their vast hollowness. The wrong word is to blame for the wrong conclusion.

We have chosen the very worst word in our haste, and we have needlessly humbled ourselves in doing so. We have made a wall of the word when we might have made it into six wings-two to cover the face, two to cover the feet, and two with which to fly.

Instead of Unknowable, Invisible and Incomprehensible, say Superknowable, Supervisible and Supercomprehensible. Then the right point of view is reached and the mystery is made luminous.

From the Unknowable I turn away humiliated and discouraged; from the Superknowable I return humbled, yet inspired. The Unknowable says, Fool, why bruise your knuckles in knocking at the final granite as if it were a door that could be opened? The Superknowable says, There is something larger than thy intelligence; a Secret, a Force, a Beginning, a God! The difficulty is always in the lame word and not in the solemn truth. We make no progress in religion while we keep to our crippled feet; in its higher aspects and questionings it is not a road to walk upon, it is an open firmament to fly in.

Alas, he who mistakes crutches for wings! Yet this absurdity has so recommended itself to our coldness as to win the name of prudence, sobriety, and self-suppression. We have lost the broad and mighty pinions that found their way to heaven's gate and the eye of burning love that looked steadfastly into the sacred cloud.

We have now taken to walking, and our lame feet pick their uncertain way over such stones as Unknown, Unknowable, Invisible, and Incomprehensible, and we finish our toilsome journey exactly where we began it.

Enthusiasm sees God. Love sees God. Fire sees God But we have escaped the revealing, sympathetic fire and have built our prudent religion upon the sand. On the sand! Think of it! So we go to it, and walk around it, and measure it, and break it up into propositions, and placard it on church walls ' and fight about it with infinite clamor and some spitefulness.

My soul, amid all Unknowableness, Incomprehensibleness, and other vain and pompous nothings, hold fast to the faith that you can know God and yet know nothing merely about Him. You can know Him by love and pureness, and not know about Him by intellectual art or theological craft.

Looking for the Invisible

Invisible! This is what the Bible itself says. The invisibleness of God is not a scientific discovery; it is a biblical revelation; it is a part of the Bible. "No man hath seen God at any time" (John 1:18)-"No man can see God and live" (Ex. 33:20). This is the difficulty of all life, and the higher the life the higher the difficulty. No man can see himself and live! He can see his incarnation, but his very self - the pulse that makes him a man-he has never seen, he can never see!

Anatomy says it has never found the soul, and adds, "Therefore there is no soul." The reasoning overleaps itself and takes away its own life by rude violence. Has anatomy found genius? Has the surgical knife opened the chamber in which music sings and sees the Singer? Or has anatomy laid its finger upon imagination and held it up, saying, "Behold, the mighty wizard"?

But if there is no soul simply because anatomy has never found one, then there is no genius, no music, no imagination, no chivalry, no honor, and no sympathy, because the surgeon's knife has failed to come upon them in wounding and hacking the human frame!

Anatomise the dead poet and the dead ass, and you will find as much genius in one as in the other; therefore there is no genius! Who that valued his life would set his foot on such a bridge as the rickety "therefore"? But some men will venture upon any bridge that seems to lead away from God.

A very simple anatomy will find the reason; it is because "they DO NOT LIKE to retain God in their hearts" (Rom. 1:28). It is not because of intellectual superiority, but because of moral distaste. An internal cancer accounts for this invincible aversion.

Yes, God is Unknown and Unknowable. But that does not make Him unusable and unprofitable. That is a vital distinction. If the master of science humbly avows that he has not developed a theory of magnetism, does he therefore ignore it or decline to inquire into its uses? Does he reverently write its name with a big M, and run away from it shaken and whitened by a great fear? Verily he is no such fool. He actually uses what he does not understand.

I will accept his example and bring it to bear upon the religious life. I do not scientifically know God. The solemn term does not come within the analysis that is available to me.

God is great, and I know Him not: yet the term has its practical uses in life, and into those broad and obvious uses all men may inquire. What part does the God of the Bible play in the life of the man who accepts Him and obeys Him with all the inspiration and diligence of love? Any creed that does not come down easily into the daily life to purify and direct it is imperfect and useless.

Courage and Sacrifice Comes From God

I cannot read the Bible without seeing that God (as there revealed) has moved His believers in the direction of courage and sacrifice. These two terms are multitudinous, involving others of kindred quality and spreading themselves over the whole space of the upper life.

In the direction of courage, this is not mere animal courage, for then the argument might be matched by many gods whose names are spelled without capitals. No, this is moral courage, noble heroism, fierce rebuke of personal and national corruption, sublime and pathetic judgment of all good and all evil.

The God-idea made mean men valiant soldier-prophets; it broadened the piping voice of the timid inquirer into the thunder of the national teacher and leader. For brass it brought gold; for iron, silver; and wood, brass; and for stones, iron. Instead of the thorn it brought up the fir tree, and instead of the brier the myrtle tree, and it made the bush burn with fire.

Wherever the God-idea took complete possession of the mind, every faculty was lifted up to a new capacity and borne on to heroic attempts and conquests. The saints who received it subdued kingdoms, wrought righteousness, obtained promises, stopped the mouths of lions, quenched the violence of fire. Out of weakness they were made strong, waxed valiant in fight, turned to and fight the armies of the aliens.

Any idea that inspired life and hope in man is to be examined with reverent care. The quality of the courage determines its value, and the value of the idea that excited and sustained it.

What is true of the courage is true also of the sacrifice, which has ever followed the acceptance of the God-idea. This is not the showy and fanatical sacrifice of mere blood-letting. Many a Juggernaut, great and small, drinks the blood of his devotees.

But spiritual discipline, self-renunciation, the esteeming of others better than one's self, the suppression of selfishness--these are the practical uses of the God-idea. It is not a barren sentiment. It is not a color vapor or a scented incense, lulling the brain into partial stupor or agitating it with mocking dreams.

It arouses courage. It necessitates self-sacrifice. It touches the imagination as with fire. It gives a wide and solemn outlook to the whole nature. It gives a deeper tone to every thought. It sanctifies the universe. It makes heaven possible. Unknown-Unknowable. Yes, but not therefore unusable or unprofitable.

Creating the Creator?

Say this God was dreamed by human genius. So be it. Make Him a creature of fancy. What then? The man who made or dreamed or otherwise projected such a God must be the author of some other work of equal or approximate importance. Produce it! That is the sensible reply to so bold a blasphemy.

Why would man make a Jehovah and then take to the drudgery of making oil paintings of Him and ink poems about Him and huts to live in indifference to Him? Where is the congruity?

A man says he kindled the sun, and when asked for his proof, he strikes a match that the wind blows out! Is the evidence sufficient? Or a man says that he has covered the earth with all the green and gold of summer, and when challenged to prove it, he produces a wax flower that melts in his hand! Is the proof convincing? The God of the Bible calls for the production of other gods-gods wooden, gods stony, gods ill-bred, gods wellshaped, and done up skillfully for market uses. From His heaven he laughs at them, and from His high throne he holds them in derision.

He is not afraid of competitive gods. They try to climb to His sublimity but only get high enough to break their necks in a sharp fall. Again and again I demand that the second effort of human genius bears some obvious relation to the first. The sculptor accepts the challenge, so does the painter, so does the musician; why should the Jehovah-dreamer be an exception to the common rule of confirmation and proof?

We wait for the evidence! We insist upon having it. Then, so we don't waste our time in idle expectancy, we can meanwhile call upon God., saying, "Our Father which art in heaven, Hallowed by thy name. Thy kingdom come. Thy will by done in earth, as it is in heaven!" (Matt. 6:9-10).

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